**The Stolen Generation**

The policy of forcibly removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) children from their families continued until the late 1960’s. It is estimated that 100,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families and raised in homes or adopted by white families, up until the 1960s. The policy was designed to ‘assimilate’ or ‘breed out’ Indigenous people. These children became known as the ‘Stolen Generations’.

**Forced removal**

The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was official government policy from 1909 to 1969. However the practice took place both before and after this period. Governments, churches and welfare bodies all took part.

The removal policy was managed by the Aborigines Protection Board (APB). The APB was a government board established in 1909 with the power to remove children without parental consent and without a court order. Children could be put into an institution or mission dormitory, fostered or adopted. Many children were fostered or adopted after spending time in a children’s home.

Under the White Australia and assimilation policies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were ‘not of full blood’ were encouraged to become assimilated into the broader society so that eventually there would be no more Indigenous people left. At the time Indigenous people were seen as an inferior race.

Children were taken from Aboriginal parents so they could be brought up ‘white’ and taught to reject their Aboriginality. Children were placed with institutions and from the 1950s began also being placed with white families. Aboriginal children were expected to become labourers or servants, so in general the education they were provided was very poor. Aboriginal girls in particular were sent to homes established by the Board to be trained in domestic service.

The lack of understanding and respect for Aboriginal people also meant that many people who supported the child removals believed that they were doing the ‘right thing’. Some people believed that Aboriginal people lived poor and unrewarding lives, and that institutions would provide a positive environment in which Aboriginal people could better themselves. The dominant racist views in the society and government also means that people believed that Aboriginal people were bad parents and that Aboriginal woman did not look after their children.

No-one knows how many children were taken, as most records have been lost or destroyed. Many parents whose children were taken never saw them again, and siblings who were taken were deliberately seperated from each other. Today many Aboriginal people still do not know who their relatives are or have been unable to track them down.

The generations of children who were taken from their families became known as the Stolen Generations. The practice of removing children continued up until the late 1960s meaning today there are Aboriginal people as young as their late 40s or 50s who are members of the Stolen Generations.

**Bringing Them Home**

In the 1990s the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (the Australian Human Rights Commission) started a national inquiry into the practice of removing Indigenous children. The [Bringing Them Home Report](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html) on the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was tabled in Parliament on 26 May 1997.

The report outlined the devastating impact the child removal policies had on children and their families. It found that many of the institutions and homes in which the children were placed were very cruel, and sexual and physical abuse of the children was common. It found that many of the people who managed the removals, including both the government and churches, abused their power and breached their supposed obligations as protectors and ‘carers’.

The report told a story of welfare boards, of segregation, of so-called ‘assimilation’ policies which did not work. The report also told stories of mothers fleeing into the bush with their babies, of the virtual slavery of the young girls who were sent out to rural properties to work as maids and of nannies of the children being treated like cattle. One woman reported: “We was bought like a market. We was all lined up in white dresses and they would come round and pick you out like you was for sale”.

The report found that the practice of forced removal was highly traumatic not only for the children but also for their families. The policy broke important cultural, spiritual and family ties which crippled not only individuals, but whole families and even whole communities. The report found that members of the Stolen Generations suffered higher rates of sexual abuse, maltreatment, dislocation of family life, poverty and hardship than other Aboriginal people.

The report also found that the policy of forced removal was based on racist assumptions about the benefits that would flow from such policies. The aim of the policy was to ‘breed out’ the Aboriginal race. In international law practices designed to destroy an entire race of people are known as genocide, and are forbidden under the 1948 Convention of Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

While many records have been lost, it has been estimated that between 1 in 10 and 3 in 10 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed between 1910 and 1970.

**Continued Impact**

There have been many studies which show the damage caused by the forced removal on Indigenous communities.

While some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families on genuine welfare grounds, and some gained access to some advantages (such as increased educational opportunities), the great majority of Indigenous children who were removed suffered life-long negative consequences.

For example, people who were members of the Stolen Generations are more likely to suffer from depression, have worse health and a shorter life span than other Indigenous people, and are more likely to be imprisoned than other Indigenous people. For example 50% of deaths investigated by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody were of Indigenous people who have been removed from their families as children.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were placed with white families did not find out about their background until late in life. Disconnection from land and language meant loss of culture for many. One of the people interviewed for the Bringing Them Home Report said: “A lot of people say that they don’t know what exactly they are, whether they’re white or they’re black. Where exactly they belong.”

The impact of the Stolen Generations has also passed on to the families, who suffered the loss of the children, and to the next generation - whose parents were part of the Stolen Generations.

For more information about the impact of the Stolen Generations policies see the Human Rights Commission resources available from [www.humanrights.gov.au/](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/) (follow the links to the ‘Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice’ section and the ‘Bringing Them Home Report’ page. This includes useful information for schools and teachers).